INTRODUCTION

Different concepts have been employed by historians in different times to have a comprehensive view of the past. We are familiar with political history, social history, economic history and administrative history. Maritime history is yet another concept, which has been gaining momentum and currency these days. It has become a tool in the hands of several Indian historians who are interested in Indo-Portuguese history. The study of maritime history enables these researchers to come closer to the crucial dynamics of historical process.

Maritime history embraces many aspects of history, such as international politics, navigation, oceanic currents, maritime transportation, coastal society, development of ports and port-towns, sea-borne trade and commerce, port-hinterland relations and so on. As far as India and the Indian Ocean regions are concerned, maritime studies have a great relevance in the exchange of culture, establishment of political power, the dynamics of society, trade and commerce and religion of these areas.

The Indian Ocean served not only as a conduit for conducting trade and commerce, but also served and still serves, as an important means of communication. The Indians have carried commodities to several Asian and African countries even before the arrival of the Europeans from India. Exchange of goods promoted maritime trade as well as the fusion of different cultures in the Indian

\[1\] Mathew, K.S., Studies in Maritime History, Pondicherry University, 1990, p. xi.
Ocean. Art, architecture, culinary habits, music, clothing, language and religion went through a transitional period because of the maritime activities in the Indian Ocean.2

In this way, the proposed thesis titled “Maritime History of the Pearl Fishery Coast with Special Reference to Thoothukudi - AD 1500-1658" is an attempt to highlight the maritime trade and commerce conducted by the Portuguese on the Pearl Fishery Coast between AD 1500-1658. Though the Portuguese had ports and trading centres in the Coromandel Coast which extends from Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin) to Pazhaverkadu (Pulicat), the researcher has taken for her study the area lying between Kanyakumari (the southern most tip of India) and the island of Mannar which was called as the Pearl Fishery Coast by the Portuguese.

The Pearl Fishery Coast has a long history, beginning from the Sangam Age. With the dawn of the New Age (the sixteenth century), the Pearl Fishery Coast which had till then remained a free zone and had enjoyed the freedom of navigation, became a backyard of the Portuguese. A century later, the same coast became a bone of contention and the Portuguese who had enjoyed a monopoly of trade had to yield to the Dutch and the Pearl Fishery Coast passed into the hands of the Dutch. The Portuguese era (AD 1500-1658) on the Pearl Fishery Coast is the specific period of this research work.

Location

Tamil Nadu is situated on the eastern side of the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula. On the southeastern side, it has about 1,000 kms of coastline along

\[2 \text{ Ibid.}\]
the Bay of Bengal. The Pearl Fishery Coast is situated in the Gulf of Mannar, extending from Kanyakumari in the south to Rameshwaram in the north. The Gulf of Mannar is that portion of the Indian Ocean lying between the western coast of Sri Lanka and the eastern coast of Tamil Nadu. Its northern limit is the chain of islets and rocks called Adam’s Bridge.3

The small coastal strip extends about 250 kms from the south to the north. The Portuguese resided in the island of Mannar and due to political upheavals in Tamil Nadu administered the entire Fishery Coast from this island for a certain period. The Gulf was named after the island of Mannar. The international boundary passes through the Adam’s Bridge and Mannar has now been passed on to the political jurisdiction of Sri Lanka.

The Gulf of Mannar is uniquely influenced by southwest and northeast monsoons and is internationally known for its diversified and precious maritime resources such as sea grasses, corals, chanks, (conch shells) pearl oysters, turtles, and sea cows. It is called the paradise of marine biologists.

There are twenty islands which extend between 8° 47’N lat 78°12’ E long and 9° 15’ N lat - 79° 14’ long from Pamban to Thoothukudi and these islands are arranged north east from Thoothukudi. Excepting Krusadi island, Muyal island and Nalla Thanni island, these islands are small i.e. less than 5 sq. kms in area. These islands are generally formed of a calcareous framework of dense corals and coral

3 Ramaswami A. Gazetteer of India, Ramanathapuram District, Tamil Nadu State, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1972, p.21.
reefs. The southern most Pandyan island has now been connected with the main land following the construction of the major port at Thoothukudi.\(^4\)

The rocky ground where the pearl oysters generally occurred is locally called ‘paar’ or pearl bank. There are about eighty such pearl banks in the Gulf of Mannar along the Indian Coast. Among the paars of the Indian Coast in the Gulf of Mannar, Tholayiram paar is the most extensive pearl bank of about 25 sq. kms. in area and this was also the most productive and remunerative of the banks of the Gulf of Mannar.\(^5\)

There were several flourishing trading centres and ports along the Pearl Fishery Coast. Thoothukudi was the head quarters and it was given its due political, commercial and cultural importance by the Portuguese. It is situated almost at the centre of the Pearl Fishery Coast. The annual pearl fishing was undertaken from here. All the islands are spread out before Thoothukudi. It (Thoothukudi) was strategically important in the sense, that the Portuguese could control Sri Lanka from here due to its proximity. After the arrival of the statue of Our Lady of Snows here in 1582, Thoothukudi became all the more important and it became the nucleus of all the activities of the fisherfolk of the Pearl Fishery Coast. The impact of the maritime history of the coast is obvious and experienced concretely more in Thoothukudi than in other areas. Therefore the researcher has evinced special interest in Thoothukudi in her work.

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\(^4\) History of Indian Pearl Banks of the Gulf of Mannar, Department of Fisheries, Government of Tamil Nadu, Madras, 2001, p. 550.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 559.
Statement of the Problems

(i) The coastal community (the Paravas) has imbibed certain peculiar customs, rites and usage of words due to the heavy influence and impact of the Portuguese.

(ii) The Catholic religion was introduced and used by the Portuguese to exploit the fisherfolk here.

At present, the life of the Paravas living in the coastal area has not improved much compared to others living just across the road.

Traditional fishing is a highly seasonal, insecure and risky job. They (the Paravas) work the whole night or day or both continuously, daring nature and fighting against wind and water, thunder and storm, current and cruel fish. Their life is fraught with many dangers, and all for an irregular and adequate income. As they struggle hard, their nerves are highly strung and are made still more weaker by their habit of excessive alcohol consumption and lack of good rest. So whenever they do not have full time work or have no work, they are highly restless and irritable. At the least provocation, they explode, ready to grab indigenous arms to murder and to mutilate each other, as they stand divided into several groups.

Their religion and spirituality have no authentic expression in their lives. They end up with the celebration of a few festivals to demonstrate their extravagance which also often leads to clashes, bloodshed and murder. This is repeated once or twice or thrice a year. Consequently, instead of love, happiness and peace, fear and anxiety prevail constantly among these Christians.
One wonders whether Catholicism has freed them or fettered them.

This question calls for a healthy critique of the impact of the Catholic religion on the life of the Paravas in the Pearl Fishery Coast.

**Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The advent of the Portuguese to the Pearl Fishery Coast, the Mass Conversion of the fisherfolk and the attraction of the pearl trade have a lot to do with the present life style of the Paravas.

**a. Social**

The fisherfolk can no longer remain in their present isolated life-pattern claiming pride of their caste. They must give up their policy of isolation and widen their area of social relations with other neighbouring communities.

**b. Economic**

The Paravas can look out for alternative ways and means of sustaining their livelihood. The sea which is the source of their life has also become an impediment to their economic growth. An alternative Parava economy with a steady annual income alone can eradicate the illiteracy and poverty prevalent among the Paravas.

**c. Religious**

The faith and the religion which the Paravas profess and practise should liberate them in all the spheres of their lives. Religion therefore should be understood in a critical sense, that it is not an end but only a means. The fisherfolk
can no more be a mere source of tribute for the growth of the Church which is now concerned only with the life after death.

Through a systematic and sustained education and awareness building, in short, through proper social education, they (the Paravas) have to be made to realise all these aims and objectives, and to come to decision and act.

The thesis aims at creating an awareness among the Paravas so that they would free themselves from the religion which subdues, suppresses and domesticates them. Secondly, the maritime skill and labour which they possess could be used in a constructive way so that a collective economy could emerge in the Pearl Fishery Coast.

Methodology

In content methodology - descriptive, interpretative and analytical approaches have been adopted. The writer has relied heavily on the primary sources that deal with the historical period (AD 1500-1658) of the Portuguese here. Secondary and supportive sources also have been referred to. A summary and an analysis and conclusion have been made at the end of each chapter.

Important events, like the Mass Conversion, the private trade of the Portuguese officials, the trade in war-animals, the international trends that affected the local trade, etc. have been critically analysed. The views of the historians related to this topic have been either supported or disagreed with by providing apt and supportive reasons.
The historical documents pertaining to the topic chosen have been studied, analysed and the impact and the implications have been brought out in relation to today’s context. A final conclusion, including all the aspects of the conclusions made under each chapter, has been presented elaborately.

Sources Identified and Located

The materials for this work were collected mainly from the Historical Archives of Goa at Panaji, the Xavier Centre of Historical Research at Porvorim (Goa), Heras Institute of Historical Research at St. Xavier’s College Mumbai and the Tamil Nadu Archives at Chennai.

All the source materials available in English and Portuguese have been identified. They have been classified into primary and secondary sources. The primary sources which are available mostly in Portuguese are in the form of manuscripts and published documents. The accounts left by contemporary travellers, chroniclers and missionaries also fall under the category of primary sources. The researcher learnt Portuguese to gain first hand access to the primary sources.

Monços do Reino (Royal letters sent to Goa during the monsoon). Assentos do Censelho do Estado (Proceedings from the Council of the State). Assentos do Conselho da Fazenda (Proceedings from the Council of Revenue). and Regimentos da Fortalezas da India (Regulations about the Forts of India) are the other important published documents which have been consulted. All the eighteen volumes of Documenta Indica, Documentação para a Historia das Missões do Padroado Português de Oriente (Documentations of the Missions’ History of the
Portuguese Padroado of the Orient (in five volumes) and the Letters of St. Francis Xavier have also been referred to.

The accounts left by the contemporary travellers, chroniclers, Portuguese officials and missionaries have been given due importance. Ptolemy, Marco Polo, Francois, Domingos Paes, Fernão Nuniz, Tome Pires, Duarte Barbosa, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Gaspar Correa have provided a lot of information about pearl fishing, pearl trade, trade in war-animals and details about important ports. The accounts of these adventures have also been treated as primary sources. James Hornell's several Bulletins regarding pearl fisheries and pearl trade deposited in the Archives of Chennai provide a lot of information. The researcher has consulted most of the records.

A special mention has to be made to George Schurhammer whose contribution is immense with regard to the history of the Fishery Coast. All his works, whether they are primary or secondary, contain a lot of information about the socio, economic, political and cultural life of the Paravas in relation with the Portuguese. Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times (three volumes) and Orientalia are other important works which have been referred to.

The secondary sources also have been accorded equal importance as there are several exponents who have contributed to maritime history. Studies in Maritime History and Mariners, Merchants and Oceans-Studies in Maritime History by K.S. Mathew, Portuguese in the Tamil Coast-Historical Explorations in Commerce and Culture (1507-1749) by Jeyaseela Stephen, The Portuguese,
Indian Ocean and European Bridgeheads by Pius Malekandathi and Jamal Mohammed, Maritime India in the Seventeenth Century by Sinnappah Arasaratnam, Português e o Mar de Ceilão-Trato, Diplomacia e Guerra (1498-1543) by Jorge Manuel Flores, The Indian Ocean—A History of People and the Sea by Kenneth McPherson, The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700, by Sanjay Subramanyam are some of the secondary source books. Other relevant printed books, journals and gazetteers have also been used as secondary sources to establish historical facts.

Review of the Literature (Sources)

The researcher finds that the sources, both primary and secondary, are ample and there is a scope for further research in the same field. The primary sources available in the archives in India and Portugal are in Portuguese. Since the researcher has depended solely on the sources available in India, she thinks that she could have contributed more if she had had access to the archives and libraries abroad also.

In general, the primary and the secondary sources have been referred to equally in the research work. Secondly, the same method has been followed in each chapter. Comparatively, the references from primary sources have dominated the thesis. Proof for not only the formal commercial activities but also for the amiable the day to day interactions between the Portuguese and the Paravas as one family in the beginning, and for the estranged relations towards the end are found only in the primary sources which are highly revealing and quite interesting.
Hypotheses

(i) The maritime activities of the Portuguese have positive and negative influences on the Fishery Coast.

(ii) Their religion (Catholicism) has been more a hindrance to the growth of the Parava society.

(iii) Unless the fisherfolk free themselves from the religion that weighs them down, the future of their economy seems to be bleak.

Plan of the Thesis

The first chapter brings out a historical survey of the Pearl Fishery Coast up to the arrival of the Portuguese. The researcher has explained how the pearl fisheries were monopolised first by the Tamil Pandya rulers, the Vijayanagar rulers and their viceroys (Nayaks) in the middle and later by the Muslims.

The second chapter deals with the maritime activities of the Portuguese in the Pearl Fishery Coast. The Portuguese settlements before and after the Mass Conversion and trade in pearl and other items have been elucidated.

The third chapter is a continuation of the second chapter which narrates the Portuguese trade in strategic goods like horses, elephants and saltpetre. The various agents who promoted the maritime activities of the Portuguese have also been brought out clearly.

The fourth chapter traces the decline and fall of the Portuguese. The Pearl Fishery Coast became a bone of contention between the local and the
international powers and finally the Dutch, the second European power, occupied the entire Pearl Fishery Coast in 1658.

The fifth and final chapter speaks about the socio, economic political and cultural impact of the Portuguese on the people of the Pearl Fishery Coast. Before the Mass Conversion, all the Paravas were Hindus. All rites and rituals related to their births, deaths and marriages were alienated from the new Christians after the conversion. The first great impact of the Portuguese Padroado (Royal Patronage to the Catholic Church) was the Mass Conversion. The second great impact was the cultural influence of the Portuguese on the Pearl Fishery Coast.

Limitation of Study

The writer’s attempt in this research is very modest, in the sense that she has not totally exhausted the topic. This research has unveiled an area which needs further and deeper study not only for the sake of historical research, but also to throw more light on the life of the Paravas so as to lead them towards their empowerment and to enable them to be reasonably critical of the Catholic religion in their daily life.

Conclusion

After analysing the various dimensions of the thesis titled “Maritime History of the Pearl Fishery Coast with Special Reference to Thoothukudi (AD 1500-1658)”, one can understand the importance of the subject matter which is discussed in the forthcoming chapters elaborately. Let us go to the first chapter which takes us to a historical survey of the Pearl Fishery Coast from time immemorial.